

The St. Dunstan Mystery

By PERRY NEWBERRY.

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"I might have waited, not you," I explained. "I could have left you another night of happiness, but now there will be but one man to look at your face when you see the corpse, and he will be half asleep. You must deceive him completely. They know me well at the morgue, and will believe I have brought a friend with a morbid curiosity. Should there be other bodies we must look at them, but no greater show of emotion, remember, no matter who you may find. Can I trust you, Miss Reade?"

"I'll try," she faltered, but I saw that the cognac was beginning to steady her nerves.

"Come," I said, taking her arm. I handed Francis a coin which may have increased his suspicions, but I did not care. I led her out of the restaurant and down the street to where the city's morgue hid away behind the Hall of Justice. As we turned into its narrow alleyway the tower clock struck twelve.

Ned Harris was on the night watch, and, as I hoped, was but half awake. "Slumming," I explained, and he smiled knowingly.

"Not much of a show tonight," he said, as I mumbled an introduction of Miss Reade under another name. "Just the one you discovered yourself."

I was glad it was to be easy, and I kept a reassuring hand on the girl's arm as we followed the deputy into the cold room beyond. She was trembling. "A little nervous?" I asked her, so that Harris might hear.

"It gives 'em the creeps," he chuckled. "I suppose that's why they come." He pulled the sheet down from a form lying straight on its marble slab.

"Enough!" I cried roughly. I had made my first suspicious certainties in Miss Reade's first look at the face.

She was wonderful in her courage of spirit. Although the fingers on my arm clenched convulsively, she made no cry, and the glance I gave her face showed me she would restrain emotion that might be perceptible to the deputy. I led her to the door, remarking calmly to Harris that little of his exhibit was plenty for most people.

"Many thanks, Ned," I cried, hurrying through the outer office as he replaced the covering over the dead face. "See you again," and passed quickly out with a cry of "Good night" over my shoulder.

There was a cafe on Merchant street at the end of the morgue alley, and it had a side entrance which kept open all night. I hastened Miss Reade within and to one of its tiny boxes, seating her on the leather-covered bench beside the table.

"Now cry—cry all you please," I said softly. "You will not be disturbed by any one, and I shall be close at hand." I pulled the curtains behind me, said a word to the bartender, and placed myself on guard before her door.

It was only a few minutes later when the curtain opened and she motioned me to join her. "Thank you," she said, trying bravely to smile. "I have cried, and I am better now. That was she."

"I knew," I sat beside her and placed a gentle hand upon her arm, seeking her confidence. "Does this make a difference in what you may tell me, Isabelle?" I asked.

She took my hand in both her own. "Dear friend," she said, and her voice was very sad. "This makes it all the more impossible to say one word—to answer a single question. Oh, I must be dumb—dumb—dumb! You must not question, for my eyes, my manner, may reveal another secret—more secret than ever, now that it is a tragedy. Promise that you will not try to learn!"

I could not give that promise. "It may be that I must know to save you, Isabelle," I explained. "For that reason only, I must learn what is behind this murder."

She shuddered. "It was murder then—not—not—" She could not say the word.

"She was shot by another's hand." "That is better—better for her! At that place—the morgue—the man said something about you discovering her. I do not understand."

"I chanced to find her. Do you want to hear all that I know of it?" She nodded, too distressed to speak, and I told of the St. Dunstan mystery even to the meddling with my revolver and the strange appearance of the hatpin in my effects. If I had tried I could not have learned anything from her expression, for, during my story, she never looked at me, holding her head lowered, her face between her hands. Nor did she make a single comment or ask a question when I had finished.

"Isabelle," I said, after a pause which I hoped she would break. "Would what you know of this give me the name of the murderer?"

"No, no, no!" she answered quickly. Then, "Please do not question me—

please!"

I held back the query which was at the tip of my tongue. She arose uncertainly. "If you will take me to the hotel, please," she said, then smiling faintly. "It has been a disastrous ending for my gratitude evening, John Gilmore."

There was nothing I could say to help her sorrow. With my lips opened questions were certain to come out, so I pressed them tightly shut and took her to the St. Francis. She did not speak a word until we were beside the elevator which would take her to her room. "You are not angry with me, John?" she asked, her lips trembling.

"Not in a hundred years!" I cried emphatically. "I am mad at my own utter unreasonableness, my awkward inquisitiveness. I want to hammer questions at you when I should be reassuring you. You are not going away tomorrow, Isabelle?"

There was a sparkle in the smile she gave me. "Is that reassurance, John?" she asked, and I let loose a "Damn!"

"I'm going home and think this thing out, Isabelle," I said, "and when I get through thinking, I'll know what I'm going to do. At nine tomorrow morning I shall be here—right there"—pointed at a chair in the rotunda—"waiting for you to come down, and I'll be either a decent reassurer without a question in me, or I'll take you by the shoulder and shake the truth out of you for your own good. At nine—remember!" And I turned to go.

"Good-by, John," she said. "Good night," I replied, over my shoulder.

I felt a hand on my arm and she was beside me. She put both her little hands into mine. "John Gilmore, you are a good man and a strong man," she said. "I do not want you to shake the truth out of me. Good-by, John." And she was gone.

I smoked two pipes before the gas grate, one convincing myself that I must know all Isabelle Reade knew, one satisfying myself that I could help her best by leaving her secret alone. Such was the condition of my usually logical mind that I could not reason clearly for the mixture of extraneous matter bearing only indirectly on the subject. It seemed of vital importance that she had called me "John," and had become "Isabelle" to me in this one evening; that she had given me her hands and held my own; and the fact that I was double her age placed a cloud on my reasoning faculties.

I decided to set my alarm clock and go to bed, determining the question in the morning when my brain was fog cleared. I found the little demon sleep-destroyer, wound it, set the alarm-hand at six, placed it close to my pillow, then went back to the gas grate for another pipe.

This one was just rosy dreams of the kind most men have at half my age, but hitherto barred out of my life by its contingencies. It glided on pink-hued clouds through its various phases to the one where a beautiful face hovered over a breakfast coffee urn, and that reminded me I was hungry. I squirmed in my soul at this sordid disillusionment, but habit was stronger than sentiment.

It was after two, supper-time for the morning-paper man, and for eighteen years I had eaten them. Habit pulled me from my dreams, my pipe, and my chair. I threw an outer coat over my smoking jacket, grabbed up a cap, and ducked around the trunks and scattered paraphernalia to the outer door.

As I opened it I heard the elevator go down; just as two nights before, it started from my floor, and there was no sound of its closing door. I ran hastily to the shaft, my feet making no sound on the thick carpets, and looked down. It was too far below me to be visible, but it had not yet reached grade.

Its soft purr ceased and I waited for the jar of the opening door. A second—two—three—I was counting my heartbeats—all was still! For what seemed an interval of minutes I waited, but the door was not opened. The St. Dunstan was wrapped in the silence of late night, the hall light dimmed. At the bottom of the shaft the automatic elevator was at rest, and its door had not opened to allow egress of its occupant.

I looked at my watch, holding it so I might see the circling second-hand. I pressed my head against the steel wickets of the shaft, my ear eager to catch any sound from below, and I barely breathed while five long minutes were checked off. The ticking of my watch was the only thing my ear caught of sound; there was no movement audible from below.

For another minute I waited in hesitation of doubt. I might return to my room, leaving the St. Dunstan mystery to those whose business it

solution was, asking no questions of this strange happening of the night, seeking no explanation of the self-operating elevator; or I might push the button beside me and bring the elevator up to make answer.

I might run away from this enigma, crowd it outside my thoughts for the remaining hours before the Wilton sailed, and get far away from danger, free from the machinations of secret enemies and chance conspirators, or wade in deeper, become more seriously involved, and perhaps be forcibly detained by the law. It was really none of my business, and Isabelle Reade had shown me she did not desire any help.

The temptation was strong to walk back to my room and get into bed. I could insist next morning that Isabelle start for her home at once, see that she did start. Then I would get away on the Wilton and forget the whole affair in new interests and excitements. The alternative of bringing that elevator up was a job for the strongest nerves.

And then I remembered the foolish thought of a romantic girl that put me into a cast-iron suit with a plume in my bonnet and a rollicking steed between my legs, and I—I compromised. I walked down-stairs, five flights. I went carefully, cautiously, peering around corners before venturing, and I realized how much of bravery may be represented by a revolver. For eighteen years I had relied on six leaden slugs in the cylinder of my forty-one; that missing, I was a coward. The strength of my arms, nature's weapons, had no meaning, for I had never depended on fists empty of steel.

The last flight I negotiated on tiptoe, and so slowly that I scarcely made progress. When I could see around the cornering wall into the lower hall, I stopped completely, studying its every detail! The night light burned before the elevator, the outer doors were closed, the large plate glass windows stared at empty side-walks, dim in fog.

There were four large chairs, set with almost geometrical exactness in the corridor; one large writing-table near the front; two rubber plants. I studied the shadows. A door to the private office was open, beyond it darkness, and I feared that darkness.

I bolstered my courage to sneak along the walls to the outer office door and look within; desk, table, wastebasket, chairs, and emptiness; then I went to the elevator.

Its door was tightly closed, but the electric globe above made a checker-board of light and shadow within, and I did not need to open it. Someone sat in the corner, as someone had sat with me two nights before. It was a deepening of black shadows, vague and formless, but there could be no mistaking it for anything but what it was. I ran to the outer door, placed two fingers against my teeth and let out the night call for the help of the law.

Patrolman Cobb came running, hammering the stone wall with his night-stick as he ran, sending the signal for help to his kind, and in a moment we were before the elevator door. Cobb threw it back and turned on the switch, flooding the car with light.

In the corner of the elevator, his head back against its steel side, was the man I had purposely bumped against on Union street the night before, the shadow of Isabelle Reade; and he was stone dead.

CHAPTER VII.

The New Tenant.

It was two hours later and Holme and I sat alone in my room. Marcus had just left, dubious, perhaps, of the story I told, but still willing to freshen his wits with my Scotch whisky. To what lengths of suspicion his doubts might grow, time would have to prove.

"The trouble with us," I said to Holme, "is lack of individual knowledge of all the threads in this case."

You hold some, so do I, and Marcus has more. We can't combine them for a solution."

"I don't think it would be healthy telling Marcus about the empty shell!" said Holme quizzingly.

"No. It wouldn't do." I was thinking more particularly of Isabelle Reade, whose story I did not intend to tell either Marcus or Holme. "I am sure Marcus is not so constructed that he could believe in our empty shell theory. He is questioning my two-o'clock appetite right now, and God knows where that is going to lead him! I'm not a bit certain I'll sail tomorrow morning, Holme."

"You can postpone that. What we must do is unravel this mystery."

I paced up and down the floor, dodging trunks. It seemed that everything and everybody was in league to keep me tied here in San Francisco when I should be at my new vocation, teaching steamers economy. Well, I wouldn't stand for it! I would place Miss Reade aboard her train with instructions to the conductor, and I'd sail on the Wilton.

My mind made up, I was perfectly willing to help Holme at his solving game, so long as it meant only the exercise of my gray matter. I'd go just that far and no farther, conjecture to my capacity and stop this side of action. Holme, his story written and sent to the office, was ready now to theorize.

"It's another part of the same crime," he began, "and the man is probably just as much a stranger here as was the girl. A quick identification would of course, set us galloping along the trail of both murders, but we needn't expect that. We have to start on the surmise that both are unknown, or little known, in San Francisco."

"You are ready to admit the murders were done in the building and

on this floor?" I asked.

"I'll admit they were done here," he answered.

"On this floor," I amended quickly. "What do you know about the tenants up here?"

Holme referred to his notes. "There are fourteen suites," he said. "Eight three-room and six two-room. Four of the three-room suites are vacant."

"Been through 'em?" I asked quickly.

"Sure. Empty, except for air. Want me to read off the tenants of the others?"

"Yes, with all you've learned about them. Wait till I get my pipe."

I went into the rear room where I had left it on the table, snapping on the light as I entered, then remembered the light should be burning. I had not turned it out when I left. I stopped right where I stood, making certain of my memory. I had lighted up when I set the alarm-clock, and the light was burning when I picked up my cap, for I found it by the light; and I did not cross to the bed where the switch was after taking my cap. That light should be burning!

"What's the matter?" asked Holme, who could see me plainly.

"Oh, nothing!" I answered, sarcastically, picking up the pipe and a pouch of tobacco. "Somebody's been in here and turned off this light, that's all."

"Crispey!" whistled Holme. "You sure?"

"Certain; but hell's bells, Holme! Let's not go nutty over this thing. Sit down and read that list. Smoke—or drink, but keep away from these slideshows."

"Who—"

"Never mind who or why! Forget it! Get on that list."

Holme sat down again, but he moved his chair so that he could see the hall door in my rear room, and I left the light still burning there; and he kept looking up from his reading at frequent, startled intervals.

"Suite 601," he read, "with rooms two and three, Alfred Lantin, commission merchant—"

"I know him. Pass him."

"Four, five and six, William Bentley, stock broker, California street, six years in business, well known—"

"Sounds all right. Next."

"Seven, eight and nine, vacant. Ten, eleven, twelve—here's one to think about, Gil. His name's Stanley Jocelyn, and he's a society bud of sorts. Doesn't toll nor spin, but has it to feed to the birds."

"I'll O. K. him. Next."

"You know him?"

"For years. Plays poker professionally. O. K."

"Thirteen to fifteen, vacant. Sixteen to eighteen, Ignatz Gregr—"

"Spell it."

Holme did so. I did not try to improve his pronunciation. "What about him?" I asked.

"No visible means of support. Here only a month. Keeps to himself pretty much. Evidently German, but speaks good English—"

"Not a German name."

"Has a German accent."

"You've seen him?"

"Yes. Interviewed him. Old man with a group of whiskers who hates his own voice. Didn't get enough out of him to do me any good, but he looks too benevolent for murder."

"Pass him temporarily. Who next?"

"Those are the east and south apartments, three rooms. You're next in nineteen and twenty."

"O. K."

"Two chaps in twenty-one-two, Gresham and—"

"Know 'em both. O. K."

"Twenty-three and four, Arthur Cavell. Here three months. Actor or vaudeville, out of work."

"Seen him?"

"No, but Marcus did and has him shadowed. I'll see the reports. He might be a white-slaver—"

"Bosh on the white slaver! Forget that Marcus theory, Holme. Who next?"

"Next is twenty-five-six. Duncan Hale—"

"And his white bulldog. Know 'em both."

"Then Jeffrey Williams and T. E. Lewis, both attorneys in same office in Mills building. Young men. I'll O. K."

"Good. Go on."

"The corner suits, twenty-nine and thirty. James Freal, another stranger. Took the place last Monday for a month, then went away the next morning. Still out of town."

"Did you go through his rooms?"

"No, nor Marcus. The office says he'll be back tomorrow, so Marcus decided to wait."

I laughed. "Marcus is mighty careful since he got off wrong in the Cator case," I said, referring to a search without a warrant which brought charges on the sergeant's head. "Go on, Holme."

"The two on the north are vacant. We're clean around the circle, Gil."

"Gregr, Cavell, and Freal," I said, checking the doubtful ones on my fingers. "We'll interview them. Come on, Holme."

"Now? At five in the morning?"

"No better time. A man doesn't lie fluently when he's just been prodded out of sleep."

"And what about Freal?"

"Interview his room."

"Break in?"

"Look here, Holme; you and I have no stars to be taken off our chests if we make a break." I found a bunch of keys in a tray of my trunk. "Here," I said, "is as good a sneak-thief's outfit as any man needs. Come on—there's no time to lose."

Holme following, I made for the door of 629. I wanted to get through the illegal work first, for our entrance of Freal's apartment was no less than house-breaking. The police might overlook it as clever newspaper work

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Dr. Clamptett and several of the police had arrived while Marcus was investigating, and the body was taken away, Holme and the sergeant following me to my room, where we gain began the fruitless quest of conjecture and theory; but with Marcus it was not a loquacious task.

He sat back grim and glum, listening and drinking Scotch, but he had no white-slaver or other theories to advance. There was something on his mind, and I had an idea I knew what it was.

I gave him the opportunity to get it off his chest.

"Well, boys," I remarked, yawning, "it's up to you. In another day I'll be on the bounding main, far from strife and care."

"Think you ought to go with this on?" queried Marcus.

"Why not? What's it all to me?" I countered.

"There'll be inequities and investigations. Besides, your paper needs you." "Forget that last," I said dryly. "I've no paper. Now, what have I for an inequity or investigation that either you or Holme can't give?"

Marcus hesitated. "Each one of these people you have found," he said finally; but it wasn't all he was thinking. "Correct; found 'em and left 'em just as they were," I answered promptly. "And you on the spot a few minutes afterward to see just how they were found. Holme here, with me in this last case, too. Bosh, Marcus! You wouldn't stall a sea voyage for that."

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to postpone it," he said finally. "Ask and be damned!" I cried angrily. "I won't postpone it—not for a minute."

"Then we'll have to detain you, Gilmore," declared the sergeant, rising. "Arrest me, you mean?"

"I didn't say that. Detain the word."

"It'll be a good deal more than a word that'll hold me back," I said sarcastically. "It'll have to be chains and bars, and a mighty good legal reason on top of them. Sit down, Marcus, and let's find out just where we are."

The police sergeant had his hat and a determination.

"I'm going back to report, Gilmore," he said, "and I am telling you now that you are not to leave the city without my permission."

"Sit down, you idiot!" I cried, giving him a shove that landed him in his chair. "Sit there and talk sense—if you can! I'm no drooling babe to be told what I can or can't do by an insensate ass! You give reasons and I'll listen to them."

"You've given the reasons yourself, Gilmore," said Marcus, a bit less peremptory. "You've reasoned it out so well I believe you. Three people have been shot to death on this floor, and in each instance you are the only person awake, with keys to their rooms and a gun that fits their bullets. It isn't evidence enough to hang you, but I think it'll hold you in town."

"It might," I acknowledged readily. "It won't though, Marcus, for you're not convinced yourself. It isn't as though I was any Tom, Dick or Harry; for the Sentinel will ask awkward questions as to evidence, even if I'm not on their staff. No, Marcus, you're going to let me start for Ecuador," I continued impressively. "You're going to escort me to the dock and see me sail. For why? Because I won't remain unless you jail me, and you dare not jail me."